

J.F.K., Then And Now

After 25 Years, His Aura Resists The Chill of History

By MICHAEL T. KAUFMAN

FOR much of the 25 years since John F. Kennedy was killed, his death has tended to overwhelm his life, casting his Presidency as a virtuous road to martyrdom. But in recent years both that life and that Presidency have been weighed from critical perspectives that either did not exist during his thousand days or only matured later — influences like feminism, the Vietnam peace movement, the New Left and neo-conservatism.

Indeed, even in regard to the civil rights movement, which was in full sway during Kennedy's Presidency, historians are diverging from a consensus that had assigned him a leading role. Several writers, most recently Taylor Branch, have contended that the era should more rightfully be identified with the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

Interest in President Kennedy is surging, and not only because the anniversary of his death falls this week, on Nov. 22. For many now in middle age, including those ascending to positions of power, basic political reflexes were established in the early 1960's. Then it seemed that an attractive, sophisticated and witty man had displaced the small-town Rotarians who exemplified the Eisenhower years. Guy Lombardo gave way to Pablo Casals, and Robert Frost read at the inaugural. The Ugly American was going to yield to the Peace Corps.

Another John Kennedy emerged later, from the accounts of historians and biographers, most notably Garry Wills, and from investigators delving into old gossip. Collectively, these portrayed a man who could con-

duct an affair in the White House with a gangster's moll, who was fascinated with clandestine operations, who built his own image with the cunning of a press agent and whose panache approached swagger, both in his private life and in his national and foreign policies.

But even now, memories of a thrilling sense of movement can obscure that negative version of the man. Both blatantly and subliminally, Kennedy's spirit was routinely invoked in the 1988 Presidential campaign. Gov. Michael S. Dukakis stressed the Massachusetts origins, the social visions and the underdog combativeness that he said he shared with Kennedy, while Republicans from Jack Kemp to Dan Quayle sought to project the youth, vigor and spontaneity of his image.

"While much of the recent historical work on Kennedy has involved negative and unflattering disclosures, all the references in the campaign were positive," said Gary Reischart, a historian at the University of Maryland. "What remains constant has been Ken-

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nedy's brilliance in using the Presidency to exhort the nation."

Prof. Herbert S. Parmet of the City University of New York, whose two-volume study of Kennedy almost a decade ago is credited as one of the first to depart from the early hagiography or iconoclasm, agrees. "There is no doubt that Kennedy still sets the standard for the Presidency in a television age," he said in a recent interview. "That much was clear in the 'You're no Jack Kennedy' charge that Bentsen leveled at Quayle."

There is virtual unanimity about President Kennedy's wit and charm and style, and about the positive ends they served. But many historical questions remain as to who Jack Kennedy was, and these continue to be studied and debated.

For example, new questions about his relations with Martin Luther King and his commitment to the black leader's vision are raised in Taylor Branch's new book, "Parting the Waters: America in the King Years."

Hints of Opportunism

It was mostly in the afterglow of Kennedy's thousand days, and not during them, that he became known as a civil rights champion; most of the legislative accomplishments of the era were the work of Lyndon B. Johnson. On this score, Mr. Branch's picture is distinctly less flattering than some earlier accounts. The book describes how, in the 1960 campaign, Kennedy exploited a phone call he made to Coretta Scott King while her husband was in jail, later exaggerating his friendship with Mrs. King to gain black votes. It also describes Kennedy, fearful of what J. Edgar Hoover knew of his erotic encounters, succumbing to the F.B.I. director's pleas to approve wiretaps of Dr. King's phones.

As to Kennedy's sexual liaisons, the last decade has brought reports of involvement with women including Marilyn Monroe and the Mafia moll Judith Exner and, when he was an intelligence officer in World War II, with a suspected Nazi sympathizer. The reports, while varying greatly in reliability, have established a promiscuous, reckless image that few dispute any longer.

Prof. Henry F. Graff of Columbia University, a historian who specializes in the American Presidency, said such revelations contrast with the laudatory books and reminiscences that appeared in the decade and a half after the assassination. "They were not unlike books about Lincoln," Professor Graff said. "In the case of Kennedy, the hagiography began to give way to critical assessments of liberals disillusioned by Vietnam."

Indeed, many reassessments came from the New Left, which argued that old Cold War assumptions and loyalty to expansive capi-

talist interests shaped Kennedy's policies. This was the contention of Bruce Miroff's "Pragmatic Illusions," published in 1976, before the bulk of Kennedy's papers were made available to scholars.

In 1974, Nancy Gager Clinch, a feminist writer, wrote "The Kennedy Neurosis," which she called a "psychohistorical" study. She was widely attacked at the time for the speculative analysis, but her theory relating what she termed the "hyperactive" sexuality of President Kennedy and his father, Joseph P. Kennedy, to a "macho" view of leadership surfaced in other books, notably Garry Wills's "The Kennedy Imprisonment."

Mr. Wills, a professor of American culture and public policy at Northwestern University, subtitled his 1982 book "A Meditation on Power," and depicted President Kennedy as a man ensnared by his own myth. The book gave wide exposure to such findings by more recondite historians that Kennedy's Pulitzer prize-winning biography, "Profiles in Courage," had been ghost-written and that the Pulitzer it won had been engineered by Arthur Krock, the late columnist and Washington Bureau Chief for The New York Times.

Mr. Wills portrays a compulsive risk-taker in both private and public life, who viewed the Bay of Pigs "as a James Bond exploit, the

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very definition of the New Frontier." Like some other historians, including Mr. Parmet, Mr. Wills sees the seeds of the Vietnam debacle in the Cuban invasion that failed.

As for Kennedy's direct responsibility for Vietnam, the issue is still unclear; by the time of his death, 16,000 American soldiers were there with an uncertain mission. Kennedy's advisers and defenders, men like Kenneth O'Donnell and Arthur M. Schlesinger Jr., insisted that had he lived he would have extricated the United States.

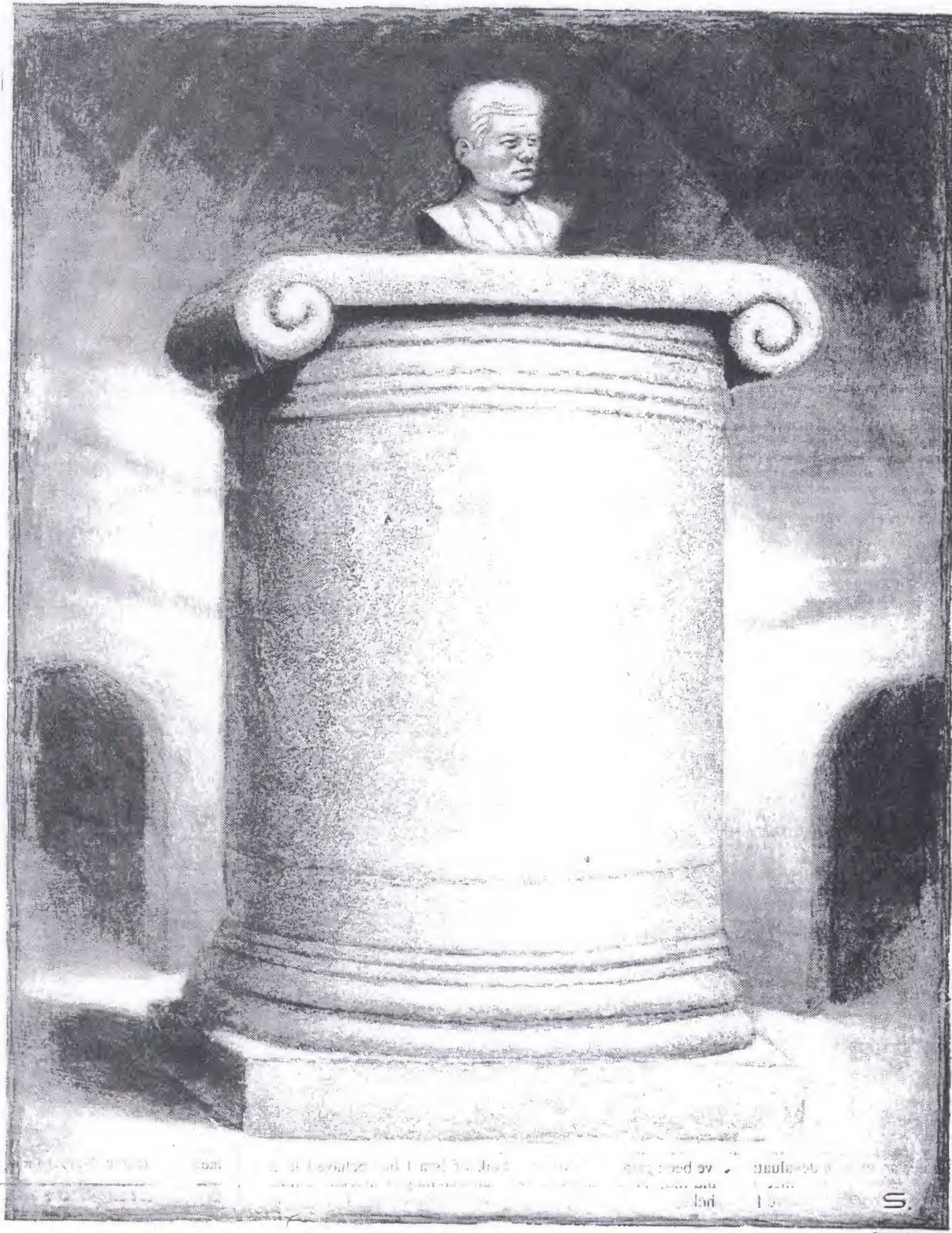
Such assumptions were challenged by David Halberstam's "The Best and the Brightest" in 1972. The book focused its criticism on the technocrats and Cabinet members who waged and planned the war, but these were all men drawn to Washington by Kennedy. Furthermore, Mr. Halberstam wrote that if the President had doubts about Vietnam, he never showed them in public.

The Writer-Fans

The Kennedy loyalists, besides Mr. Schlesinger, included some writers — Theodore White, Joe Alsop, Ben Bradlee and Hugh Sidey, among others. Victor Navasky coined the term "honorary Kennedys," while other critics called them "the court historians" or "keepers of the flame."

Mr. Wills regards the group as something of a feudal body whose loyalties became institutionalized. But others find the constant devotions of these men to be laudable proof of Kennedy's ability to lead and inspire. "Look at the self-serving recollections that have come from President Reagan's aides even before his term ends, and you have to regard Kennedy's people with admiration," Mr. Parmet said.

Younger historians say that the skirmishing between the loyalists and the revisionists has waned. "The New Left critiques have subsided and the personally involved defenders also are increasingly leaving the field to younger historians who are looking at the Kennedy years with greater detachment and disinterest," said Mr. Reichart, the Maryland professor. "We've probably learned the worst about Kennedy and the best about him, and now what historians face is the task of putting it into context."



David Shannon